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**TITLE: The role of ‘family practices’ and ‘displays of family’ in the creation of adoptive kinship**

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**ABSTRACT**

Adoption has changed significantly over the last four decades placing new demands on those affected by adoption including adopters, adoptees and birth relatives (i.e. the

‘adoption triangle’), as well as the professionals involved. Over the same period sociological theories relating to the family have developed considerably, yet their application to adoptive family relationships has been limited. This paper reports the findings of an in-depth narrative study of 22 parents who adopted children over a 24-year period, linking their experiences to the sociological concepts of ‘family practices’ and ‘displaying family’. A common challenge shared by adoptive parents following domestic stranger adoption in an era of increasing openness was the requirement to create a new version of kinship that includes both adoptive relatives and birth relatives within the conceptual model of the adoptive family as well as the day-to-day ‘doing’ of family. The relevance of findings are explored in relation to adoptive family life, adoption practice and, specifically, post- adoption support services.

KEYWORDS: Adoption, openness, kinship, family practices.

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Recent changes in UK adoption policy and practice**

Following a Prime Ministerial review in 2000, there has been much legislative activity concerning the issue of child adoption within the UK. The Adoption and Children Act (2002) was closely followed by the Children and Adoption Act (2006) in England and Wales and in Scotland the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act (2007) was introduced. Alongside this new legislation, a raft of regulations has been introduced concerning adoption support services, disclosure of adoption information and intermediary services as well as national minimum standards for adoption agencies.

The Adoption and Children Act (2002) represented the first major overhaul of adoption legislation in England and Wales since the Adoption Act 1976. In the period between these two Acts, adoption has changed significantly. Adoption today increasingly involves the placement from local authority care of older children with difficult family histories. The range of people who are considered suitable to adopt has also widened to include single adopters, gay and lesbian adopters, unmarried couples and adopters with birth children. In addition, there has been a significant shift in adoption practice away from a model of total substitution of one family with another towards a model of openness in adoption.

These changes in policy and practice have brought new opportunities for vulnerable children but at the same time have placed new demands on adoptees, adoptive parents and birth relatives as well as the professionals involved.

### **The move towards openness in adoption**

The introduction of an ethic of ‘openness’ in adoption has proved to be controversial and has been much debated in the literature (Quinton *et al.*, 1997; Quinton and Selwyn, 1998; Ryburn, 1998, 1999). Recognition of the importance of the concept of openness owes much to the work of Kirk (1964) who highlighted the value of open communication about adoption within the adoptive family. Since Kirk’s groundbreaking work, increasingly sophisticated conceptualisations of openness have emerged (Grotevant and McRoy, 1998; Brodzinsky, 2005; Neil, 2007). Grotevant, and McRoy (1998) have described three types

of adoption openness, namely, *confidential adoptions* in which little or no information is exchanged, *mediated adoptions* in which only non-identifying information is exchanged and communication is through a third party, and *fully disclosed adoptions* in which identifying information is exchanged directly between the parties and face-to-face contact is arranged without the intervention of the adoption agency. Brodzinsky (2005) has made a distinction between communicative openness and structural openness. Structural openness relates to the arrangement of the adoptive kinship network. By contrast, communicative openness is concerned with the process of exploring the meaning of adoption for those within the adoptive family. The concept of ‘dual connection’, that is, the continuing importance of the connection between the adopted child and birth family as well as the adoptive family, has also emerged (Brodzinsky, 2005). There is now an expectation, in the majority of cases, of some form of ongoing contact between the adopted child and their birth family following adoption. It has been estimated that 70% of adopted children now experience either indirect or face-to-face contact post-adoption (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000).

### **Conceptualising the adoptive family**

The changing nature of family relationships and kinship has received much sociological attention and concepts have emerged that have transformed the ways in which ‘family’ is understood. An emphasis has been placed upon kinship as a socially constructed relationship rather than a biological fact (Weston, 1991; Weeks *et al.*, 2001) and the concepts of ‘family practices’ (Morgan, 1996) and ‘displaying family’ (Finch, 2007) have emerged as explanations of the social processes through which families are constituted.

However, little attention has been paid to the relevance of these concepts for the adoptive family. A thorough review of the sociological literature by Fisher revealed the widespread absence of the topic of child adoption (Fisher, 2003) and there is little evidence of a reversal of this trend within more recent sociological literature. Openness raises significant questions about the meaning of kinship within contemporary adoptive families (Modell, 1994). It unsettles traditional Western cultural assumptions about the primacy of biological connectedness and the designation of kinship as either fictive or real (Carsten, 2000). It also renders unsustainable the social expectation that we must belong to this family *or* that, not this family *and* that (Rosnati, 2005). This paper reports the findings of a study undertaken in North East England that draws on contemporary anthropological and sociological theories of family and kinship in order to better understand the process of adoptive family relationship building within the context of increased openness.

## **THE STUDY**

The broader study from which the material for this paper is drawn involved an analysis of records held by a voluntary adoption agency in North East England of adopters and adoptees who came into contact with the agency between 1976 and 2001 and a series of in-depth biographical interviews with adoptive parents with whom children were placed in the same period. The research questions addressed in the study were:

1. In what ways have the profiles of adopted children, adoptive parents and the families created through domestic adoption changed between 1976 and 2001?

2. What personal and social challenges are faced by adoptive families throughout the life of an adoption and in what ways do these impact on family life?
3. How do adoptive parents manage the challenges of adoptive family life across the lifecourse?
4. What implications do the findings of the research have for contemporary adoptive parenting and adoption theory, policy and practice?

This paper reports some of the findings of the interviews with adoptive parents. In the paper we draw on the concepts of ‘family practices’ and ‘displaying family’ to examine the process of adoptive family construction in order to better understand the nature of the challenges faced by adoptive parents when attempting to build such a version of kinship and the ways in which this is managed within adoptive families.

### **Sample**

Twenty-two qualitative interviews were undertaken with 11 adoptive mothers and 11 adoptive fathers from 11 families. All of the adoptive parents interviewed were married couples, all were white, and all had adopted through a voluntary adoption agency. A total of 23 children from 18 birth families were adopted domestically by these 11 couples between 1977 and 2001. The children’s age at the time of the interviews ranged from 7 to 31 years old. While all of the adoptive parents described challenges that they had faced as adoptive families, almost all described their situation as happy and settled. Only two couples described significant and potentially destabilising conflict within the family and none of the placements had disrupted at the point of the interview.

Given the wide time frame in which the participating families had adopted, they had experienced a range of types of adoption and degrees of openness. Six couples taking part in interviews adopted babies and five adopted older children. Four of the six couples who adopted babies experienced an adoption that would be described as ‘confidential’. These families were provided with relatively little information about the birth family at the time of the adoption and had no contact with birth relatives as children were growing up. These adoptions took place in the late 1970s in the 1980s. Two couples adopting babies had some limited indirect contact with the children’s birth family. One of the couples who adopted a baby in the mid 1980s received birthday and Christmas cards from birth parents but did not correspond with the birth family. The last family to adopt infants adopted two babies in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This family had had a one-off meeting with one of their children’s birth mothers and had ongoing indirect contact with both birth mothers. The five couples who adopted older children did so between 1992 and 2001. The children had been looked after by the state for a range of reasons including abuse, neglect and death of a single parent. Two of these families had direct contact with birth relatives at the time of the interviews. The remaining four families had indirect contact ranging from annual letterbox contact to cards and presents at birthdays and Christmas. Two of these families had previously had direct contact with birth relatives but this had faded away or had been discontinued. For one family, arrangements were particularly diverse. The couple had adopted four children from three birth families. Two of their adopted children had indirect contact with their birth family, one had direct contact with a sibling and the other had no contact.



## **Methods**

Ethical approval for the study was obtained through the University of Durham's ethics procedures. Adopters were recruited to the study voluntarily through letters of invitation or as a consequence of adoptive parents responding to an advertisement placed in a local newspaper explaining the study and calling for research volunteers. A broad topic guide was developed in order to elicit stories relating to the adoptive parents' experiences of family life. The topics included: the current structure of the adoptive family; the early days of adoptive family life; key milestones as the child(ren) was growing up; rewards and challenges of being part of an adoptive family; sources of formal and informal support; and current experience of adoptive parenting. A series of topic cards were also used to provide a loose structure to the interview. These were introduced at the beginning of the interview and reviewed at the end. The topics included: family, success, achievements, challenges, support, ordinary/different, openness. One card also had a question mark in order to provide an opportunity for interviewees to direct the interview. Each adopter was asked to choose a small selection of family photographs to talk about during the interview as a way of communicating key experiences that had occurred throughout the lifecourse of the adoption. Interviews were between 2 and 2.5 hours long and most took place in the adopters' homes.

## **Analysis**

Data were analysed both thematically and narratively. A cross-sectional analysis (Mason, 2002; Braun and Clarke, 2006) was undertaken in order to explore the range of themes,

concepts and issues evident within the data. Some themes were developed inductively while others, such as references to ‘nature/culture’ and ‘sameness/difference’, were developed from existing literature. Narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993) was undertaken to explore the changing nature of adoptive relationships over time, the discourses evident within adopters’ narratives and the social function of these narratives (Plummer, 1995). As the study used a qualitative interpretive approach and a non-representative sample, no attempt was made to quantify data or generalise from the findings. Instead, the aim of the analysis was to provide conceptual insights into the lived experience of adoptive parents.

## **FINDINGS**

The analysis of data generated through interviews revealed that a common challenge shared by adoptive parents following domestic stranger adoption was the requirement to create a new version of kinship that includes both adoptive relatives and birth relatives. Such kinship is inherently counter-cultural and, therefore, creates dilemmas that must be negotiated within day-to-day family life. This challenge was evident regardless of the timing of the adoption, the age of the child at placement and the type of contact arrangement in place following adoption, although the ways in which this operated within families were diverse. Here, we focus in detail on two aspects of family building, that is, the requirement for adoptive parents to:

- *gain* and *maintain* a family relationship with adoptees; and
- *retain* the significance of birth relatives as family members within the adoptive family.

We begin with the task facing adopters and adoptees of *gaining* and *maintaining* family relationships.

**Adopters' perspectives on the task of *gaining* and *maintaining* family relationships with adoptees**

Much emphasis has been placed on the symbolic significance of the granting of an adoption order in order to provide security for children. However, it is also known that this alone cannot guarantee permanence and the relationship between the child and adoptive parent is crucial to the achievement of a successful adoptive placement. This has been theorised in terms of bonding and attachment between the child and main caregiver and has been linked to healthy child development (Bowlby, 1953; Fahlberg, 1994; Schofield and Beek, 2006). The analysis of data from adoptive parents in this study revealed a more complex and multi-layered social process at work in the construction of adoptive family relationships and the creation of kinship. The features of the process of construction that emerged from the narrative accounts of adopters were that the building of adoptive family relationships is a dynamic process and a lifelong task. The process involves a complex interplay of agency and structure, of micro systems of intimate relationships and macro systems of culture and discourse, of personal identity and social identity. Below, some examples are given of the part played by 'family practices' and 'displays of family' in the process of constructing adoptive family relationships between adopters and adoptees.

Adopters spoke at length about the work undertaken to establish relationships when the child first joined the adoptive family. Adopters of some older children in particular described their adopted children in the early days of placement as being '*like visitors almost*' and '*basically strangers*'. These accounts highlighted a central challenge for adoptive families in the case of domestic adoption by unrelated adults, that is, the need to move from the status of strangers to family. Despite this challenge, however, there was an expectation that such family relationships would develop over time and they would, as one adopter put it, '*learn to be a family*'. Adopters spoke of the important role of family activities in the establishment of family relationships. An adoptive father of older siblings described the process of becoming a family in terms of the familiarity developed through *being* together and *doing* together. He said:

'... making sure there was a lot going on and sort of encouraging them and being with them... it's being involved with them. And of course familiarity with each other is bred from that and they get to know how you are.' *Father (no. 9)*

Several other adopters of both infants and older children spoke of the importance of family activities in the development of a family identity. Some linked 'family' and 'shared activity' in phrases such as '*we're a big skiing family*' or '*we're a camping family*'. Where shared family time, activities and interests did not exist, this was seen as problematic. One adoptive father of a teenage son and daughter contrasted his experience of shared family activities with his daughter with a lack of such activities with his son, with whom he described a poor relationship. He explained:

‘...we love to go to the theatre, she loves going to the theatre. We like going on holiday, she loves going on holiday. [My adopted son] doesn’t. He’s got no time for the theatre, no time for holidays, all he wants to do is kick a football...’

*Father (no. 2)*

In some cases the repetition of certain family activities and routines meant that they took on the quality of a family ritual that was anticipated and welcomed. One adoptive mother explained:

‘[My husband] always makes tea on Saturday night. It’s the only time really we eat in [the lounge]... but Saturday’s we watch a film. That’ll start tonight. [the children will say] “what are we watching tomorrow?” But that’s a family thing.’

*Mother (no.7)*

These activities became, therefore, established family practices (Morgan, 1996) that took on an important role in not only establishing, but also maintaining, family relationships. Similarly, archetypal family events such as shared Christmases, family holidays, first days at school, family weddings, the birth of grandchildren and other milestones in family life appeared to cumulatively contribute to the ongoing and complex process of building family identity.

However, these practices also appeared to have an additional role. These family events were transformed into family stories, a family history, which could be told and retold within the family and to those outside the family and, therefore, became ‘displays of

family' (Finch, 2007). This repository of stories allowed adopters to express joy and pride in their adopted children, for example, through a story about a child's performance in the school play, or deep concern for them, through perhaps, a story about an illness, accident or hospital admission and, therefore, convey care and intimacy both to those within and outside of the adoptive family. Often these family stories had a comical element or involved gentle teasing of a member of the adoptive family. For example, a story was told about the occasion when an adoptive daughter enthusiastically, and somewhat prematurely, volunteered to be a bridesmaid at a neighbour's wedding. The neighbour agreed to this and on the day of the wedding, as the adoptive mother tells the story:

'...[my daughter] was just so excited, I mean she looked lovely, and every picture that we tried to take of the wedding couple or the wedding party, she was in, somewhere on the picture (laughs) ...' *Mother (no. 3)*

Above all, this account had the quality of a well-rehearsed story that had been told on many occasions over the years and had become part of a family tradition.

The significance of such stories becomes apparent when viewed within the context of Western cultural assumptions of the primacy of biological connection and the second-class status of 'fictive' or legal kinship. Adopters gave several examples of experiences that confirmed this Western cultural view of the second-class status of adoptive families such as an adopted daughter's experience of bullying by her peers in school on the basis that she belonged to "*a fake family*". Within such a cultural tradition, biological kinship is

characterised as strong and enduring and fictive kinship as potentially fragile and impermanent (Carsten, 2004). The many family stories told by adopters, therefore, conveyed, communicated or displayed to others complex messages of family intimacy, care, affection, pride, concern, belonging, longevity and, above all, the legitimacy of such family relationships. Adopters often produced objects relating to stories, such as family photograph albums, as additional 'tools of display' (Finch, 2007) in an effort to make family history and belonging more tangible and therefore, more robust. Part of the process of constructing adoptive family relations, therefore, included the resistance of cultural discourses that devalue fictive kinship.

Adopters described a number of events throughout adoptive family life that appeared to challenge the adopters' sense of legitimacy and create uncertainty in family relationships. The events discussed by adopters were diverse and included a child starting school, a child moving up to secondary school, the birth of a grandchild, letterbox or direct contact with birth relatives and search and reunion experiences. These events, therefore, included what could be described as 'ordinary' life events as well as 'adoption specific' life events. What they had in common was their tendency to bring into focus the contrast between 'normative' family and adoptive family life. These events required active work on the part of adopters to regain a sense of ontological security (Giddens, 1991) as individuals and as a family. The diversity of the timing of the various events within the adoptive family lifecourse and adopters' experience of multiple events was evidence of the lifelong nature of the task of constructing adoptive family relationships.

Having explored the task facing adopters and adoptees of *gaining* and *maintaining* family relationships we will now move on to look at the related task of negotiating a place for birth relatives within the family identity. This is discussed below.

### **Adopters' perspectives on the task of *retaining* birth relatives' significance as family members**

History has taught us of the potentially damaging consequences of secrecy in adoption and adoption can no longer be viewed as a 'clean break and fresh start' (Howe and Feast, 2000). Instead research has highlighted the lifelong significance of the biological connection between child and birth relatives (Modell, 1994) and an emphasis has been placed on the promotion of dual connection (Brodzinsky, 2005). The evidence from adoptive parents' narratives suggests that adopters are acutely conscious of the significance of biological relationships as they create and conduct family life, even in the case of confidential adoptions. Drawing again on the concepts of 'family practices' and 'displaying family' we now examine the processes by which birth relatives are included in or excluded from the conceptual model of adoptive kinship and the day-to-day 'doing' of family in the case of families who have experienced confidential adoptions, direct contact and indirect contact. We begin with confidential adoption arrangements.

#### *Retaining the significance of birth relatives in confidential adoptions - the influence of telling and talking*

Four of the families taking part in the research had experienced confidential adoptions. These families had received little information about their adopted child's birth family and



there was neither direct nor indirect contact between the adoptive family and the birth family as the child was growing up. Despite this, all of the adoptive parents participating in the research who had experienced confidential adoptions supported the practice of revealing adoptive status to their adopted children at the earliest possible opportunity. The revelation of adoptive status, however, had diverse meanings for individuals and this resulted in a range of conceptual models of adoptive kinship and diverse practices emerging even within the same family.

One adoptive mother described a very early memory of her first adopted daughter, when she was approximately three years old, skipping alongside her as they walked down the street where they lived and asking for something she wanted. When her mother told her she could not have it, her adopted daughter said, *“well my other mummy would have ...”* The adopted mother described this as a moment in which she realised that her daughter had *“in her little mind a different life, how things could have been, might have been”*. Talk about adoption and her daughter’s birth family became a regular feature of family life for this adoptive mother and daughter and the birth family metaphorically took a place at the family table. The child displayed intense curiosity about her adoption and the adoptive mother shared with her adopted daughter, over a period of several years, intimate and sensitive details about the circumstances of the child’s adoption. This was challenging given the sparseness of information available to the adoptive family. Recently this daughter, now in her twenties, has been reunited with her birth family and there has been a meeting between her birth parents and adoptive parents.

The same adoptive mother described how her younger adopted daughter was also aware of her adoptive status from an early age and yet rarely asked any questions or initiated conversations about her adoption or birth family despite her adoptive mother regularly communicating her willingness to talk and her awareness of her adoptive sister's curiosity. When her sister searched for her birth family the younger daughter is reported to have said "*I don't know why she wants to do it, you're my family*". The meanings of family and kinship were, therefore, very different for these individuals. For one, the cultural emphasis on the importance of biological connection had a deep significance. For the other the cultural expectation that we belong to this family *or* that, not this family *and* that (Rosnati, 2005) resonated and the concept of dual connection appeared to have little relevance. As a result, the communicational practices that emerged within the adoptive family were diverse.

Data from other adoptive families that had experienced confidential adoptions indicated that revealing adoptive status did not result in predictable outcomes in terms of the degree to which the birth family was included in either the conceptual model of adoptive kinship or other family practices. It appears to be the case that, following confidential adoption, the significance of biological kinship can be diminished or lose some meaning for some individuals despite attempts to introduce practices such as 'telling' and 'talking'. For others, the significance of the birth family connection persists. This variation may in part be explained by differing practices that emerge in families, but also appears to be influenced by Western cultural norms of kinship (Schneider, 1984).

*Retaining the significance of birth relatives where there is direct contact*

Four of the adoptive couples interviewed had experienced direct contact with birth relatives and two couples had been able to sustain this contact. Direct contact is considered to be an important way to maintain significant family relationships following adoption and to provide continuity for children (British Agencies for Adoption & Fostering, 1999). However, adoptive parents' narratives suggested that, even where there is a high commitment to maintaining contact, this outcome is far from assured. For example, one adoptive father spoke about the difficulties associated with maintaining meaningful family relationships between his adopted son and his birth sister. The children meet twice a year and play together. Both children are school age. He said:

'I don't think [our son] is really aware of who [his birth sibling] is because he was little when he was taken away. He sees [his three adoptive siblings] as his family. [His birth sibling] is just somebody that he goes to see and plays with occasionally'. *Father (no. 6)*

The adoptive father compared the child's relationship with his adoptive siblings with his relationship with his birth sibling and suggested that the former relationship had achieved the status of family while the latter relationship had lost this status. The father attributed the lost family status to the infrequent contact between the adopted child and birth sibling and the gained family status to the time, space and day-to-day intimacy shared with adopted siblings. His narrative challenges the distinction between 'real' and 'fictive' kinship and suggests instead that work is required to retain the significance of biological connectedness in such circumstances.

Data from the other adoptive couples who had experienced direct contact also suggested that, even where relationships were able to be maintained through direct contact, the meaning attributed to relationships between adopted children, adopters and birth relatives could change over time, with greater or less emphasis being given to the ‘family’ quality of the relationship. More understanding is needed of the practices necessary to promote dual connection or the inclusion of estranged birth relatives within the conceptual model of adoptive kinship.

*Retaining the significance of birth relatives where there is indirect contact*

Seven couples interviewed had experienced indirect contact with birth relatives via an adoption support agency. This type of contact again produced diverse conceptual models of adoptive kinship.

While the sending of birthday or Christmas cards by birth relatives to their adopted child has the potential to retain family relationships by conveying a sense of continued care, affection and connectedness to the child, this outcome is not guaranteed. For example, one adoptive mother with experience of indirect contact explained that greetings cards received from birth relatives were displayed in the home alongside cards from the extended adoptive family. Birth relatives were, therefore, given a tangible presence within adoptive family life despite their physical absence. However, the adoptive mother also explained that the cards were given a “*special*” place. She said:

‘ ... quite a few of the extended family send birthday cards and Christmas cards, and we always have a special shelf with all of their cards on and that’s always been the shelf that has the [birth family surname] cards on.’ *Mother (no. 1)*

The cards were displayed together but apart from the cards given by adoptive relatives. This decision appears to convey a sense of separation or difference between the adoptive family and birth family who are included in this family practice but not fully assimilated as kin. The narrative also reveals adoptive parents’ ability to influence the way in which communications are received and interpreted. Adoptive parents can choose whether or not to share cards with adopted children, can decide how they should be presented and discussed with adopted children, whether they should be displayed openly in the home or hidden away in a draw, whether they should be quickly discarded or treasured for years.

Another adoptive couple who adopted a baby girl spoke of their experience of letterbox contact. The baby was adopted in 1985 at a time of transition in the practice of adoption. The model of adoption as total substitution was still predominant and post-adoption contact was less commonplace than today. The child received a birthday card and Christmas card each year from her birth parents. The cards were signed by the birth parents using their first names and with a message “*always in our thoughts*”. Initially these cards were displayed alongside cards from her adoptive family. However, when the child reached age seven or eight, the adoptive mother in particular, found these cards more problematic as they prompted the child to ask about the circumstances of her adoption. A year or two later another event caused the adopters’ to reconsider the way

they handled this correspondence. The adoptive father explained that when a card arrived, his adopted daughter:

‘... danced across the road to her friends house, saying “I got a card from my mam, from my natural mam”’. *Father (no. 8)*

The father’s narrative conveyed the simplicity of the child’s understanding of this event and his uncertainty about how to deal with it. He explained:

‘... perhaps I wasn’t thinking right ... she must have been only nine or ten and not fully understanding.’ *Father (no. 8)*

Following this, cards were put away until the child was older and perceived as more able to deal with the sensitivities of adoption contact. The adoptive parents’ narrative suggests that while the adoptive family were able to tolerate the symbolic presence of birth relatives within the adoptive home to some extent, this had certain limits. When the birth parents’ continued presence became public knowledge this was more problematic. In order to step back within her comfort zone the adoptive mother chose to stop displaying these birthday cards though not to stop receiving them.

When the child reached eighteen she was contacted by her birth family through the adoption agency and asked to consider a meeting. The adoptive mother described her adopted daughter’s reaction to this request. She explained:

‘[my adopted daughter] said “I want nothing to do with them, I want the birthday cards to stop, I want the Christmas cards to stop” and I said “I think that’s a bit cruel, if it gives them some kind of comfort when they send you a card at Christmas, and a card on your birthday, I don’t think that’s too much to ask”, and she said “but I don’t want anymore mam, I just want to be left alone”’. *Mother* (no. 8)

At this point, therefore, the ‘displays of family’ in the form of birthday and Christmas cards took on another meaning for the adoptive family. The adopted daughter re-evaluated these gestures as intrusive and rejected these displays of family. The adoptive mother, on the other hand, acknowledged the birth parents’ need to maintain some connection with the adopted child and felt able to accommodate this through the acceptance of these cards. The above examples highlight the complex meanings that seemingly everyday family practices such as exchanging cards can have for adoptive families and their influence on the conceptualisation of adoptive kinship.

The adoptive mother of siblings referred to earlier also recalled a recent experience that had led her to question the meaningfulness of letterbox contact. The adoptive mother explained that her son regularly receives birthday and Christmas cards from birth relatives. Recently the child had completed his GCSE examinations and the adoptive mother had included news of the child’s exam success in her annual letter to his birth mother. The adoptive mother described her disappointment at the lack of

acknowledgement of her adopted son's exam success by his birth family. She had hoped that her son would receive a congratulations card from his birth mother just as he had from members of his extended adoptive family. The adoptive mother perceived the absence of a congratulations card as damaging to the relationship between her adopted son and his birth mother. This led her to question the genuineness of the expressions of care demonstrated by her adopted son's birth mother when sending birthday and Christmas cards. It is possible that the birth family felt constrained by the formality of the letterbox arrangement to send a card to their adopted son, however, the result of this omission was that an opportunity to 'display family' was lost. The adoptive mother's account contrasts the spontaneity of family practices with the rigidity of letterbox practices and raises questions about the ability of the system to support such spontaneity.

The implications of the findings relating to the two aspects of family building explored in this paper, that is, the requirement for adoptive parents to *gain* and *maintain* a family relationship with adoptees and *retain* the significance of birth relatives as family members within the adoptive family, are discussed below.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study inevitably has some limitations. Adopters participating in the study were all white non-disabled married couples. The study, therefore, has little to say about black adoptive family life, gay and lesbian adoptive parenting, disabled adoptive parenting and single parent adoptive family life. Also, the study has focused specifically on adoptive parents' experiences. Further research is needed to address these limitations.



Despite these limitations, however, the study has usefully provided insights into the challenges faced by adoptive families in creating a legitimate version of kinship in an era of increasing openness. The concepts of ‘family practices’ (Morgan, 1996) and ‘displaying family’ (Finch, 2007) have proved to be useful analytical tools in uncovering the complexity of the social processes involved in constructing a conceptual model of kinship and ‘doing’ adoptive family life. These processes involve active work in order to build intimate family relationships between adopters and adoptees and retain the significance of biological connections. This work is inevitably influenced by Western cultural norms and expectations of kinship (Carsten, 2004). The study has also captured the dynamic nature of the process of developing, maintaining and retaining family relationships and the lifelong nature of the task.

The study provides empirical support for the conceptual decoupling of structural openness and communicative openness suggested by Brodzinsky (2005). This study found that an absence of contact was not necessarily associated with an absence of communicative practices around adoption issues. In addition, however, the study suggests that particular forms of contact do not equate with the emergence of particular conceptual models of adoptive kinship. For example, a lack of contact did not necessary preclude the inclusion of birth relatives within the conceptual model of adoptive kinship and direct contact did not inevitably result in such integration.

The study has highlighted a range of practices and displays that play a role in the construction of adoptive kinship and the deeply complex meanings of such practices for adoptive families. More research is needed to explore further the relationship between such practices or displays and outcomes for members of the adoption triangle

We would also make a distinction between ‘professional practices of openness’ and ‘family practices of openness’, that is, practices put in place by courts and adoption agencies such as direct or letterbox contact and practices that were initiated by the family such as adoption conversations. We believe there would be much value in exploring further the relative outcomes of these distinct types of practices.

Trinder (2003) makes a helpful distinction between contact as an instrument to maintain a relationship (a ‘means to an end’) and contact as an integral component of a relationship. This distinction implies that relationship may result from contact but equally contact flows from the relationship. The connection between contact and relationship can perhaps be characterised as a virtuous cycle where contact can lead to relationship and relationship to contact, each being the outcome of the other. Where one of these elements falls out of the cycle, however, something is lost. Without relationship, contact loses meaning and without contact the relationship becomes fragile. This could also provide a helpful focus for future research.

The concepts of ‘family practices’ and ‘displaying family’ have also highlighted the interplay of agency and culture and discourse within adoptive family building. Relatively little attention is paid to the influence of Western cultural norms on the day-to-day doing

of adoptive family life within the adoption literature. We assert that the concepts of ‘family practices’ and ‘displaying family’ can offer much to professionals working in the field of adoption. The concepts lead us towards fundamental questions about the counter-cultural nature of openness and the challenges this creates within the private and public world of adoption. The findings also point towards a further use of the concept of ‘displaying family’, that is, the value of ‘displays’ as tools of intervention. The concept encourages adoption support professionals to consider the sensitive use of stories, objects and other tools of display to communicate care and family ties both within the adoptive family and outside it.

Finally, openness is currently conceptualised as a process of exploration of the meaning of adoption that occurs at three levels, that is, the intrapersonal level (self exploration), the intrafamilial level (exploration within either the adoptive family or the birth family) and the interfamilial level (exploration of issues between adoptive family members and birth family members) (Brodzinsky, 2005). The findings of this study, however, suggest a further level at which the meaning of adoption can be explored, that is, in interactions between adoptive family members and the wider community. This again is an under-researched area.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 acknowledged the lifelong nature of adoption and the potential need of those affected by adoption for ongoing support after the legal adoption. The findings of this study confirm the dynamic nature of adoptive family

relations throughout the lifecourse. There remain, however, many complex questions about the appropriate role of post adoption services in providing support and the form that this support should take. We conclude that greater attention to the process of adoptive family building and application of the concepts of 'family practices' and 'displaying family' within professional practice by post-adoption support services would be of great benefit to adoptive families.

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